Old World Archaeologist - Vol. 26, no. 4

by Barbara Soper

Many stamps of archaeological interest have featured female figurines believed to represent a prehistoric Mother Goddess. The finding of these figurines over a wide geographic area has led some researchers to conclude that Mother Goddess worship was the major religion from late Paleolithic times to the early Bronze Age. Other experts debunk the theory, holding that there is no evidence of universal Mother Goddess worship. They claim the figurines can only be explained in the context of the societies that produced them.

Without taking sides in the debate, let us see what stamps tell and show us about these figurines. The first is the Venus of Willendorf, shown on a United Nations miniature sheet in Figure 1.

The Venus was found in 1908 near the present day Austrian town of Willendorf. She is a full figured lady with pendulous breasts, enormous hips, and a bulging belly. Her face is featureless but she may be wearing some sort of cap-like



headdress or elaborate hairstyle the "lumpy" nature of the head carving. The statue dates to 15,000 to 10,000 BCE, approximately the same period as the cave paintings at Lascaux in France. The Venus is a little over four inches tall and is carved from oolitic limestone, a material not available in the region in which she was found. This indicates that even in late Paleolithic times, there must have been contacts or trade links with people outside the area.



Another prehistoric lady called the Venus of Brassempouy is shown on France (Scott 1465) and Mali (Scott 628) in Figure 2. The Venus is a very small ivory carving that is believed to have been part of a larger statue. Here we see facial features more defined than those of the Venus of Willendorf. The head has the same "lumpy" carving, which the view on the French stamp reveals to be a hairstyle. The hair appears to be braided



and tied, almost like some ancient Egyptian wigs or modern Afro-American hairstyles. The Venus of Brassempouy is believed to be 30,000 years old.

Another full-figured lady appears in Figure 3 on Greece (Scott 1147). The stamp honors International Women's Year. The lady depicted comes from the Neolithic settlement of Sha'ar Hagolan in movern day Israel and is around 8,000 years old. More than a hundred such fired clay



figurines were found at the site. The seated figurines may have been created as fertility symbols. But since they were discovered in nearly every household the team excavated, they may have had a protective function as well.



The ladies also appear on Turkey (Scott 2435 & 2495) in figure 4. Turkey 2435 shows a very plump lady holding a baby. Once

again, the figure is seated. The fact that she holds a baby indicates that she is some sort of symbol for childbirth and regeneration. Turkey (Scott 2495) is even more indicative

of that conclusion. It shows an enormous lady giving birth while seated on some sort of chair or throne. The figurine comes from Catal Hoyek, a large Neolithic town that flourished some 6,000 years ago in modern day Turkey. The excavator of Catal Hoyuk, James Mellaart, believed that goddess worship prevailed at the site. He also believed that worship of an "Earth Mother" was universal among prehistoric people.





Not all prehistoric female figurines were fat ladies. Cycladic figurines, for example, were the polar opposite of fat ladies. A Cycladic nude, carved from the abundant white marble of Greece's Cycladic Islands, is pictured on Greece (Scott 1292) in Figure 5. The lady is typified by a long neck, featureless face, folded arms, and a sense of ethereal grace. Cycladic statuettes were commonly found in tombs, indicating a possible connection with burial rituals. Although most of the figures are female, male figures are represented as well.

Another Cycladic figurine appears on a stamp from Cyprus, which was issued in 1975. Such figurines date from about 2,500 BCE. We have no idea if they represented deities, priestesses of deities, household gods, fertility symbols, or protective amulets. Within

tombs, they were often found hidden away or placed under other objects. This would hardly be the case if they represented a major deity. Also many Cycladic tombs were oriented to the East and provided with a "window" for the rays of the sun to enter at the time of the solstice. In that aspect, they have much in common with the megalithic passage graves of Europe, and the British Isles. If there was a universal deity among prehistoric



people, it was more likely to be sun worship than figurine worship. The sun was visible to all prehistoric people and played a dominant role in the success of their agricultural efforts. Knowledge of a particular goddess, on the other hand, would depend on contact with other prehistoric people and an exchange of ideas over a wide geographic area.

Nevertheless, female figurines of various types did have a wide distribution in prehistoric times. Even Japan has a mother goddess that is numbered among the nation's national treasures. The Jomon Venus is shown on a Nagano Prefecture issue of Japan (Scott Z239)

in Figure 6. The Jomon culture flourished for a long time (10,000 to 300 BC). The Venus is believed to belong to the middle period, when people used clay to fashion small, human figures. The Jomon Venus has huge hips and elephant-like legs. She has a cat-like face and appears to be wearing some sort of helmet or headdress. Her breasts and belly are small in comparison to her enormous hips and legs.



A stamp from Yugoslavia in Figure 7 (Scott 2392), issued in 1977,



shows a long skirted female terra cotta figurine. Details of the face and costume appear to be incised on the figure. Her facial features are etched in, as is a necklace, possibly of animal teeth, hanging across her chest. A belt encircles her waist with some kind of streamers attached to it.

Ethiopia (Scott 548) in Figure 8 illustrates female figurines from a variety of Ethiopian sites. Many of the figurines resemble prehistoric Venuses, although they are from a much later time period.



The earliest statuette dates to the first century BC and the others to the sixth century AD. Another Ethiopian stamp (Scott 489)

depicts a figure seated upon a throne. The stamp identifies the object as a "votive throne and statuary" from Atsbe Dera that is 2,300 years old. It is uncertain if the figure is male or female. It wears a patterned robe with banding at the hemline.





Yet another example comes from Romania. A United Nations miniature sheet issued in 1994 depicts a seated fat lady. It is called "sitting woman", and is made of polished stone. It dates to the 4th millennium BCE, and is located in the National Historical Museum of Bucharest. On the same miniature sheet, a stamp from



Serbia-Montenegro shows a seated goddess with a baby enfolded in her arms. The two stamps appear in Figure 9.

If a figurine is to be regarded as a goddess, it should be included in a setting that clearly indicates that it was meant to be worshipped. Many of the figurines so far discussed do not meet that test, making it possible that they were talismans or amulets rather than deities. On the Mediterranean island of Malta and its sister island Gozo, however,

evidence of goddess worship is much stronger. The prehistoric people of Malta erected great megalithic structures to serve as temples and tombs.

Like other megalithic structures in Europe and the British Isles, the inner stones of those places were meant to be illuminated at the winter and summer solstices or at the spring and autumn equinoxes. Keeping track of seasonal cycles was very important to Neolithic people whose survival now depended on agriculture. At the same time, the temples and hypogia (collective burial tombs) on Malta also served a religious function, perhaps associated with a fertility cult. Numerous fat lady statues have been found in the temples.



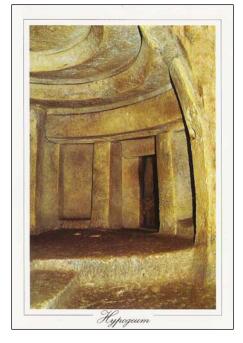
Many were tall figures, carved of rock and placed in prominent places, where they were clearly meant to be seen and perhaps venerated. The statue of a woman that originally must have been ten feet high, still stands in the Temple of Tarxien. All that remains is a pair of massive legs and a skirt.

Two stamps from Malta in Figure 10 (Scott 883 & 884) depict a seated fat lady and two obese women, one with a missing head,

sitting on some sort of bed or chair. The seated pair wear the pleated skirt

characteristic of the Maltese "goddesses". These figures clearly were involved in religious ceremonies of some kind. The Maltese temples consist of high stone walls and narrow corridors and chambers containing altars, libation holes, and rope holes used to tether sacrificial animals.



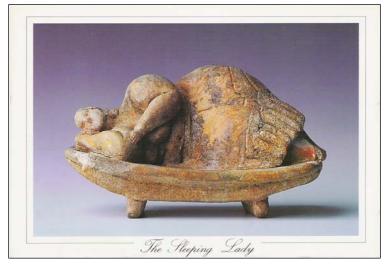


Although the temples were religious centers, the dead were not buried in them. The ancient Maltese preferred group burial in a tock-cut tomb called a hypogeum. Hal Saflieni is the name of the most famous hypogeum on Malta. It is a vast underground complex that held the remains of perhaps 7,000 people. Its twenty chambers are carved with roof beams, lintels, and other features of the temples above ground. At Hal Saflieni, excavators discovered a mother goddess, peacefully laying on her side and, apparently, imitating the sleep of the dead. Postcards showing the hypogeum and the sleeping lady appear in Figure 11.

This section of the Hypogeum is called the Holy of Hollies and is the most important and by far the best Architectural ornate room in this labyrinth.

The Sleeping Lady (Figure 12) of Malta, discovered in the Tarxien Hypogeum, is the best

known prehistoric Maltese artifact and the focal point of all visits to the archaeological museum. Although its exact purpose remains mysterious, it was probably a cult figure. So what did these figures represent to ancient people? Were they evidence of prehistoric Earth Mother worship? If so, was the woman being worshipped the same one all over the prehistoric world? Or were these the artifacts of particular cultures, whose



shamans used them to invoke magic, cast spells, bestow protection, or otherwise attempt to control the environment? We may never know, but it is interesting to speculate.

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